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THE
DWARF TRIBE OF THE UPPER AMAZON

BY

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THE DWARF TRIBE OF THE UPPER AMAZON

DANIEL G. BRINTON, M. D.

In the June number of *L'Anthropologie* the editor of that excellent journal publishes what he believes is the confirmation of the story of a tribe of dwarfs on the tributaries of the upper Amazon. His authority is vague—"an American traveler, Mr Sullivan," who says: "I found on the Rio Negro beings (*des êtres*) of a remarkably small stature. . . . So far as I could learn, they live near the sources of the Orinoco, or in that part of Venezuela which adjoins the frontiers of Brazil. They are only four feet eight inches in height and the women still less."

The editor of the journal recalls that Humboldt refers to the alleged existence of these dwarfs about this locality,² and regards Mr Cunningham's statements as a confirmation of the assertion.

It is timely, therefore, to review what has been said of this supposed pygmy race while we wait for more positive recent observations.

The story long antedates Humboldt, for it goes back to the publication of Father Acuña's voyage on the Amazon, the account of which was printed in Madrid in 1641. He heard of them from the Tupinambas, who called them *Guayazis*, evidently *guara*, men, with the diminutive suffix *çiey* = "little men."

I am inclined to believe that the father here fell into an error, taking the term literally, when, in fact, it was intended merely as an epithet of depreciation and contempt, for Father Coleti in the next century described these Guayazis as living on the south bank of the Amazon and not as small in stature, but in

² Near Esmeraldas, on the Orinoco, Humboldt measured a family whose adults averaged in height five feet, three inches, English measure (*Personal Narrative*, vol. II, p. 463). They belonged to a tribe called *Guaicas*, but he could not learn whether the other members of the tribe were similarly undersized. They are possibly the same as the *Guaicanes* mentioned by Uricoechea as dwelling at present on the Rio Meta (*Gramatica de la Lengua Chibcha*, Introd. p. xxxviii).

pluck, and partly enslaved by the Tupinambas. "Questi barbari," he says, "sono di poco spirito."¹

This metaphor was as familiar to the Tupi mind as to our own, when we speak of a man as being "about the smallest that we know." So they say *aba pia carapi* (hombre de corto animo, pusilanime). Their usual words for dwarfs are *carape*, *caratura*, *aturi*, and *apua*,² but I know of no tribes with these appellations.

The German travelers Spix and Martius, when at the Barra do Rio Negro, about 1830, heard of the pygmy tribe as dwelling on the River Jurua, and known by the Tupi name *Cauana*. This von Martius translates as derived from *cauane*, the tortoise or large river turtle, but I think it more likely to be from *caa*, forest; *ana*, people = "woods men" or "wild men." The travelers were fortunate enough to see one at that place, who measured three feet four inches high and claimed to be twenty-four years old. Unfortunately, they did not ascertain whether he was a "sport," or represented the average of his people, nor did they take a vocabulary from him.³

Now the Jurua is a tolerably well-known river. Its banks are sparsely inhabited by tribes named Nahuas, Arahuas, Marahuas, Culinos, Catahuichis, Catuquinas, etc., all of the Arawack linguistic stock. We hear in later days of no dwarfs and no Cauanas.⁴ It looks, therefore, as if the assignment of place was erroneous.

There was, however, a tribe with this name, and not remote from the spot where it is asserted the dwarfs still exist. The name *Cauanas* is applied by Fr. Jacinto de Carvajal to a horde he mentions as dwelling somewhere along the Rio Apure at the time of his visit in 1647. He says they were of the Carib nation, but adds no other particulars.⁵

These are not mentioned by Father Gumilla in his *Historia del Orinoco*, nor by Humboldt, although the latter may refer to them as *Cavenas*, whom he places on the Rio Cusiana, a branch of the Rio Meta.⁶ This would be about a hundred miles from the Rio Apure, a moderate migration.

¹ Coleti, *Dizionario Storico-geografico dell'America Meridionale*, T. I, p. 165 (Venice, 1771)

² Restivo, *Vocabulario de la lengua Guaraní*, S. V. "Enano."

³ Von Martius, *Beiträge zur Ethnographie und Sprachenkunde Amerikas*, vol. II, p. 424.

⁴ See Paul Marcey, *Voyage à travers l'Amérique du Sud*, Tome II, pp. 368-372.

⁵ *Relacion del Descubrimiento del Rio Apure*, p. 304. (First printed at Leon, 1892.)

⁶ Mentioned in the list of tribes in his *Personal Narrative*, vol. II.

The somewhat diminutive stature of a few tribes in this part of South America is well known. Dr Marcano, in his work on the Ethnography of Venezuela, calls attention to it as exemplified in the pre-Columbian skeletons he unearthed in the Aragua valley. To be sure, they measured 1 m. 56, which is not that of dwarfs.¹

Professor Virchow has shown in his monumental work on american craniology that the most striking examples of microcephaly are found among the Goajiro Indians living on the gulf of Venezuela, and belonging, I add in passing, to the same Arawack stock as the tribes of the river Jurua.² Healthy adult women average from 1,040 to 1,130 and the men average about 1,390, cranial cubic capacity.

The same distinguished authority said in his address before the German Anthropological Society at Innsbruck, 1894: "Nan-
nocephaly has been found in that part of Colombia which is in contact with Venezuela, and also in the southern part of the Cordillera and on its eastern and western slopes."

Although short, these tribes are not feeble in body. On the contrary, they are sturdily built and disclose surprising endurance and muscular strength. Their deficiency in stature cannot be attributed to starvation and general physical degeneration, but to other causes which I need not discuss.

These facts do not show anything more than that there are undersized tribes in that part of the continent, with occasional individual examples of dwarfs, such as occur in all communities.

It is still a question whether the rumor of a pygmy people somewhere in the tropical forests is not to be classed with the stories which threw a strange glamour about those inaccessible regions in the early days of the discovery. There were many of these, for I am speaking of the part of the map where was located the El Dorado, the golden city of Manoa, the home of the warlike Amazons; where dwelt the men with tails, and the mysterious *Oyacoulets*, warriors with white skin, blue eyes, and long blonde beards. All have vanished from history but the pygmies, and their turn will probably soon come.

¹ *Ethnographie Précolombienne du Venezuela*, p. 42 (Paris, 1889).

² See his *Crania Ethnica Americana*, p. 23.

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